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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9240
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2687
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0514
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0384
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000878

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, DRL, ECA, IIP

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: USCIRF AT THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE: RUHNAMA
CONFUSION REIGNS AGAIN

REF: A) ASHGABAT 860, B) ASHGABAT 737, C) ASHGABAT 466

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: At the Ministry of Culture and TV/Radio Broadcasting, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation received a warm reception and more disjointed answers regarding the Ruhnama (the late President Niyazov's "book of the soul/spirit"). Ministry officials expressed appreciation for joint U.S.-Turkmen cultural programs and journalist training. A short discussion about Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) confirmed the government's continuing dislike for the organization. The meeting revealed the Ministry's plans to take a more inclusive approach to the Uzbek minority. This was the first U.S. Government contact with the young and newly appointed Minister Kakageldi Charyardurdyev, who appeared to be adjusting to the position. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On August 22, USCIRF delegation members held a friendly and open meeting with Minister of Culture and TV/Radio Broadcasting Kakageldi Charyardurdyev as well as Deputy Minister Gulmyrat Muradov and Agadurdy Akmuradov, Head of the International Relations Department who has generally been a supporter of the Embassy's cultural programming. This was our first contact with the newly appointed minister.

APPRECIATION FOR JOINT CULTURAL PROGRAMS/JOURNALIST TRAINING

13. (SBU) Minister Charyardurdyev chose to highlight recent cooperative programming with the Embassy. In particular, he noted his appreciation for the Yellow Bird Native American Dance group who participated in Turkmenistan's first International Folk Culture and Theater Festival in April (ref C) and spoke in appreciative terms of the Ari Roland Duo's joint concerts with local musicians in July (ref B). International Relations Head, Akmuradov also thanked the United States for the recent TV-Coop program which sent a TV crew to the United States in June, emphasizing that the ministry would welcome other opportunities to train journalists in the United States. (NOTE: The discussion revealed similar enthusiasm for journalists sent to Beijing for training. END NOTE.)

GENERAL SUPPORT FOR INTERNET...

14. (SBU) USCIRF Chairman Cromartie inquired about the Ministry's role in supporting Internet access and specifically the closure of a Counterpart International Internet resource center. Akmuradov detailed his government's work in establishing high-speed Internet access for the National Library and the Supreme Council on Science and Technology. He expressed support for the NATO virtual Silk Road project and looked forward to future Internet development. Akmuradov did not address, however, the Counterpart International resource center.

... GENERAL DISDAIN FOR RFE/RL

15. (SBU) Cromartie also asked the Ministry to consider allowing RFE/RL to open its service in Turkmenistan. (NOTE: RFE/RL's Turkmen service operates from Prague. END NOTE.) Akmuradov again took the lead in replying by saying that he "did not know the value" of allowing RFE/RL into Turkmenistan. Adding that he knew several RFE/RL journalists personally from his own prior experience as a journalist, Akmuradov complained that the Turkmen Service of RFE/RL was "poor journalism," the broadcasters had poor Turkmen language skills, produced shallow reports, chose topics poorly, and mixed genres. Despite the list of complaints, Akmuradov said that if RFE/RL reporting improved and their "interests coincided" then they could reconsider.

DIFFICULTY ON THE RUHNAMA ISSUE

16. (SBU) As in other meetings (ref A), USCIRF Commissioner Talal Eid raised his concerns about the role of the Ruhnama in society, the prominence of Ruhnama quotes in the Gypjak mosque, and its

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apparent violation of Islamic norms. After a short, but uncomfortable silence, Akmuradov explained that Turkmen believers differed somewhat from their neighbors or Arab believers, and therefore, such practice was not offensive to locals. Moreover, he claimed that scholars of religion were consulted and agreed with the decision to use the Ruhnama in mosques. (NOTE: The "agreement" of scholars was part of Niyazov-era propaganda. Recently released former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was imprisoned after protesting the Ruhnama's entry into mosques. END NOTE.)

IMPROVMENTS FOR MINORITIES?

17. (SBU) USCIRF Staffer Catherine Cosman asked about relations with the Turkmen Diaspora abroad, and if any efforts were being made to review the "unfortunate" recent policies towards Russian, Uzbek, and other minorities in Turkmenistan. In reply, Akmuradov reviewed efforts to work cooperatively with the Turkmen Diaspora in a number of countries. He also noted bilateral efforts with Uzbekistan to conduct a major cultural program in 2008-12 to "advance" and "shift" policies towards the Uzbek population. Without discussing any other minority, Akmuradov mentioned ongoing efforts to conduct friendly cultural programs with all of Turkmenistan's neighbors and major economic partners.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The Ministry of Culture has generally been a more open and cooperative partner with the Embassy than other ministries. The Ministry also made it clear that joint U.S.-Turkmen programs are highly appreciated. It's imperative that the Embassy continue journalism programs for the state news media, because they are more receptive than in the past to such programs and also because of existing programs with China (and recent expressions of interest in journalism training in Iran). It was also noteworthy that Minister Charyardurdyev participated little in the discussion following his approving opening remarks. Charyardurdyev is in his thirties, significantly younger than his colleagues at the table, and has had comparatively minimal experience at this level. While open and friendly, his lack of experience showed.

19. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: It is a positive sign that the Ministry plans to be more inclusive of its Uzbek minority. And it can be seen as a hopeful sign that responses on the Ruhnama

continued to be uncertain and differed from those heard in other meetings - an indicator that the policy of promoting the Ruhnama is waning. We continue to judge Ruhnama will sooner rather than later fade to the status of cultural embarrassment and historical curiosity. END COMMENT.

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